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State polling places to upgrade for disabled

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MILWAUKEE (AP) - A survey of Wisconsin polling places shows about four out of 10 have serious barriers to the disabled, the state Elections Board says.

"Of the state's 2,773 polling sites, we determined 1,134 as disability-inaccessible," said Kyle Richmond, the panel's public information officer.

Polling places nationwide are under federal mandate under the Help America Vote Act to have new voting equipment in place by Jan. 1 that will enable people to vote independently and privately, regardless of motor or physical disability or language barriers.

Kevin Kennedy, the board's executive director, said federal funding of up to \$6,000 per polling site is available to reimburse communities for the new equipment.

The new machines will cost between \$4,000 and \$7,500, depending on the vendor, he said.

Most municipalities have set aside the money, but municipal clerks have been waiting for the Elections Board to approve one or more manufacturers' products for purchase, said Mike Hoppenrath, Watertown city clerk and president of the Wisconsin Municipal Clerks Association.

The agency is testing equipment from several vendors, and hopes to offer recommendations of at least two or three voting machines this fall, Richmond said.

Kennedy said he will distribute the federal funding only to polling sites that are fully accessible.

The issue of polling place accessibility affects more Americans than people realize, he said.

"Disabilities are a hidden issue," Kennedy said. "We definitely have an aging population, and the number of people with vision and dexterity problems is increasing. But we've had to fight the attitude of, 'Let them vote absentee.'"

Howard Kaufman, 51, of Milwaukee, who has been blind since birth, told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel he is denied the privacy most voters take for granted. He said he is forced to publicly state his choices for

candidates to a poll worker and then trust that his choices are accurately recorded.

"Technically, two workers, one from each party, are supposed to assist you in voting," he said. "Now you have given your privacy away to three people. You hope that your vote was recorded according to your wishes. You hope, but you have no way of absolutely knowing for sure."

Neil Albrecht, assistant director of Milwaukee's Election Commission, said Milwaukee probably will not meet the Jan. 1 deadline for accessibility. But he said most sites could be made to comply with accessibility standards in time for February elections with relatively simple remedies, such as portable ramps or by setting aside handicapped parking spaces.

[Return to story](#)

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